

Somers cleanup on time; 50 yrs. to go

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By William Simonsen

Federal officials say the cleanup of the old Burlington Northern tie plant in Somers is on schedule, but completion is 50 years away.

The construction of the facility to treat soils contaminated with creosote and a system of wells designed to clean up contaminated ground water have been built, said a report from the federal Environmental Protection Agency released last week.

The EPA cleanup area lies on about 80 acres of land that was the site of a railroad tie treatment plant from 1901 to 1986.

The ties, and other railroad timbers for bridges, were treated with creosote and heavy metals during the operation of the plant.

Wastewater containing the pollutants contaminated the soil and groundwater at the site.

The contamination was discovered by the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences in 1986.

The site was proposed as a federal Superfund cleanup site by EPA.

From 1984 until 1989 studies were made at the site. In 1989 the EPA required all remaining structures on the site to be removed and the soils and groundwater to be cleaned up.

In 1991, all the structures were dismantled and burned.

In 1992, it was judged that enough progress had been made that the site was removed from consideration for listing as a Superfund site, but the clean up effort continued under EPA.

Since 1992, the ReTec, the contractor on the cleanup has built an 11-acre land treatment facility at the site.

Land treatment, also known as land farming, uses naturally occurring bacteria to break down the contaminants in the soil.

The soil is irrigated regularly to encourage bacterial growth.

Soil was first spread on the synthetic liner at the treatment facility during August 1993.

One of the major installations is a water treatment plant to take the contaminants out of the irrigation water after it filters through the soil.

EPA documents said it will take bacteria about three years to break down the contaminants in each one-foot deep application of soil at the treatment facility.

It said about 53,000 cubic yards of soil will be treated at the facility.

The heavily contaminated soils being treated were excavated from a lagoon and pond at the site which was used as a collection area for wastewater during the operation of the plant.

About 19,000 cubic yards of the contaminated soil was removed from a pond only yards from Flathead Lake.

The excavation area was later refilled with clean soil and reclaimed as

part of a wetland area adjacent to the wildlife production area at the north end of Flathead Lake, said the EPA report.

A system of wells was also drilled in the cleanup area by ReTec.

Some of the wells inject oxygen and nutrient-rich water into the ground, while the remaining wells pump out contaminated ground wa-

ter, said the report.

The water purification plant built on the site also treats the contaminated water extracted from the ground.

Estimates by soil scientists said about 50 years of treatment will be necessary to extract all of the contaminated water from the ground if a large number of wells are installed.

When the results of the first wells

are evaluated by scientists, more wells will be installed, said the report.

Creosote contamination of one of Somers' municipal water wells forced its temporary shut down during the summer of 1991.

The well was placed under restrictions that call for frequent testing. Contamination was not found in the second municipal well.



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